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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ideas which contribute to better understanding of the writing portions of Reading Recovery lessons, emphasizing the importance of helping the student monitor meaning during the composing and recoding process. Topics addressed in the paper are: (1) differences between composing and transcribing; (2) sources from which children may select writing topics, and (3) three strategies used to transcribe text--analyzing new words to be used, knowing the spelling of familiar words, and relating the spelling of a known and unknown word. Contains 7 references. (EF)

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Teaching for Strategies in Writing: Maintaining the Balance between Composing and Transcribing.

by Lee Skandalaris

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Teaching for Strategies in Writing: Maintaining the Balance between Composing and Transcribing

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Reading and writing share common elements. Both forms of expression are driven by meaning and both use the same conventions. However, readers use their own knowledge and experience to construct meaning *from* text, whereas writers construct meaning *in* text. In the second edition of *Writing and the Writer* (1994), Frank Smith explains that the act of writing is a building process that is more driven by our intentions of what we wish to communicate to the reader. In writing this article, I attempt to communicate to you, the reader, insights gained from my reading of Clay and Smith that have contributed to my better understanding of the writing portions of Reading Recovery lessons. I emphasize the importance of helping the young writer monitor for meaning *while* composing and recoding the message.

As you read this piece, you are trying to extract meaning from this text. The task is somewhat limited by the lack of face-to-face dialogue. As a competent reader, you are highly successful at this task. The constructive process is what we are trying to help Reading Recovery students learn. Clay (1993) states:

> ... during the course of a recovery programme a low achiever learns to bring together:
> - the ideas
> - the composing of the message (which must be his own)
> - the search for ways to record it (p. 28).

In writing, we can think of two functions: composing and transcribing (Smith, 1994). *Composing* is described by Smith (1994) as,

> .... the idea the writer intends to communicate to the audience of readers, along with the words and grammar chosen by the writer as suitable to conveying those ideas for the reader (p. 120).

Clay (1993) suggests that the novice writer learns to compose messages (ideas) in his own words and language structures, then engages in a "search for ways to record it" (p. 28). Clay's explanation may be compared to Smith's description of transcribing. He explains transcribing the message as the physical effort in writing within the constraints of conventions of print: spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and legibility. Whereas composing occurs "in the head," as the writer gets ideas and shapes them into language, transcribing starts when the message becomes visible text.

The similarities between the two theorists, Clay and Smith, can be represented as follows:

Composing:
- the ideas
- composing the message (which must be done by the writer)

Transcribing:
- searching for ways to record it

Smith (1994) explains that,

> ... these two broad aspects of writing, composing and transcribing, compete for the writer's attention. The beginning writer needs to pay undue attention to the conventions of transcribing (p. 120).

Compared to the other language

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processes, writing is hard work requiring the most physical effort, and it is the slowest language process. Speech (*speaking*) can be delivered at 200-300 words per minute and still be comprehended by the listener. The listener can process up to 250 words per minute (*listening*) which explains why the rapid fire auctioneer (delivered at a speed of more than 300 words per minute) is incomprehensible to the less expert listener. *Reading* can range between 200-300 words per minute, but writing legibly is rarely more than 25 words per minute (Smith, 1994). The task of writing is formidable for the beginning writer who needs to pay attention to all of the conventions of transcribing: letter formation, directionality, spacing, spelling, matching symbols to sounds, etc.

As the novice writer is working hard to coordinate all aspects of composing and transcribing, we as teachers offer valuable assistance in helping the child maintain a balance between these two tensions in the writing process. We can help the young writer by teaching the child how to:

- express his ideas in meaningful units;
- shape his oral language structures into comprehensible sentences;
- learn how to develop a vocabulary of high frequency words for writing;
- hear sounds of words in sequence;
- use analogous thinking to construct new words.

While engaging in the physical effort of writing, the young writer is also facing the formidable challenge of writing for an audience that may be known or unseen. It is essential to compose text with an audience in mind. As we work with children in Reading Recovery lessons, we need to think about who the audience is for the children's writing and how we can help children develop a sense of writing for a prospective reader.

As I write this piece to you, I know my audience. I am motivated to communicate with a special group of professionals. I know the nature of Reading Recovery teachers as an audience interested in providing powerful lessons for children; we have common language and a shared mission. But for the child, we cannot assume he knows the relationship between writing and the fact that someone else will read what he writes.

The Figure contains a few examples of teachers helping set purposes for writing and determining possible audiences through their conversations with children.

As Reading Recovery teachers you can think of many more (and better) remarks to develop a sense of audience in the young writer. The important point is that the remarks need to be woven into the fabric of the writing event almost like the subliminal messages presented by the media to sell a product. The highest ". . . praise for his efforts. . ." (Clay, 1993, p. 39) for a child is the reading of his story by an appreciative audience. Because writing differs from reading in that it is more driven by our intentions of what we wish to communicate to readers, developing a sense of audience lifts this exercise from a purely mechanical act to a true act of personal communication.

For purposes of clarification, I will examine composing and transcribing further as two aspects of the writing process. Even though the following discussion deals with the topics separately, they are integrated throughout the writing process.

Purpose	Audience
• **Writes to record an experience** *Let's write about what happened last night so we can read it later.* (The teacher is sharing the permanence of writing versus the fleeting nature of talk.)	**Self**
• **Writes to explain** *What a great story about how you got your gray cat!* *Let's make a copy so you can tell your friends.*	**Class**
• **Writes to share** (The daily re-assembly of the cut-up story summarizes a book just read.) *Let's send the book home with your story so your Mom (Dad, etc.) can see how well you understood what happened.*	**Home**
• **Writes to inform** (The child and teacher compose a piece about a newly-acquired strategy:) *Let's write a letter to your Mom (Dad, etc.) about how you are learning to say words slowly to write hard words.*	**Home**
• **Rejoices in new skill** (The child has made a shift in legibility. Copies are distributed widely.) *Let's make copies of this wonderful story. It is so easy to read with the spaces you put between words. Give this one to the principal ... this one to your teacher ...*	**All**

Figure

Composing Ideas to Write

First, I have a confession to make. Recently I brought a Predictions of Progress up-to-date on one of my Reading Recovery children. I was surprised (or is appalled the better word?) on how skewed the predictions for progress in writing were. All of the goal statements I had written were about recording language; for example, "The child will know how to write at least 40 high frequency words quickly and fluently." None of the goal statements was about monitoring for meaning or about composing. My goal statements for this child needed to be brought into balance. Since confessions demand repentance, I reread several sources in my search for a better

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balance of goals in writing.

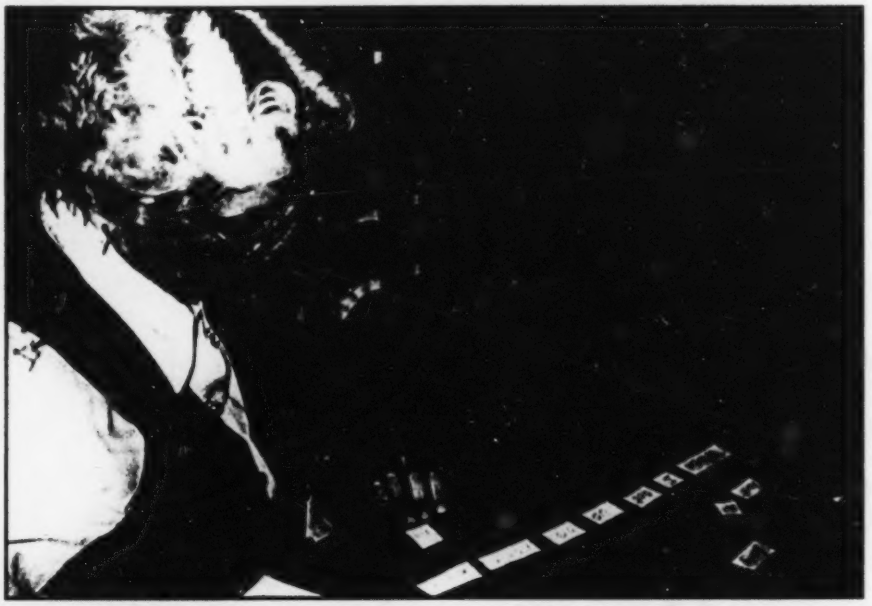
Dancing with the Pen (1996) provided a possible new goal statement for the tentative revision of my predictions of progress. This book suggests the child will know how to select topics for writing through several means: valuing first-hand experiences and their personal knowledge of that experience; making use of their surroundings in and out of school; discussing their ideas freely; adapting and making use of their own and others' suggestions; and, showing initiative in selecting their own topics for writing at the end of the program.

James Briton (1970) said, "Writing floats on a sea of talk" (p. 164), and Clay reminds us, "First, talk with the child" (1993, p. 29) in the section on composing the story. But how does talk contribute to the composing of a story by the young child? Smith (1994) helps clarify the relationship:

> **Composition is learned through reading and writing; it can also be fostered by conversation and discussion. Talking with other people in one sense is just like writing, in that it provides opportunity for the examination of ideas one already holds and for the generation of new ones. It is important to understand all the advantages of discussion. One can test one's own ideas on others, one can hear, borrow, and steal the ideas of others; but beyond that, new ideas can be generated that did not exist in any of the participants' heads before (p. 207).**

The idea for the story needs to float to the top of the sea of talk, not drown. The teacher remains open to the ideas and converses with the child in order to focus in on one thought to be expressed in writing. This process requires careful listening and gentle shaping, always holding the meaning of the message foremost.

The novice writer has a multitude of ideas whizzing around in his mind. Furthermore, talking about these ideas is generated at a much greater speed than can be written. The listening teacher seizes an idea during the conversation that is full of possibilities for growth but also has some words the child knows how to write or can get to using his present strategies. A conversation may play-out as follows:



Lee works with Andrew in the writing portion of a Reading Recovery Lesson.

Teacher: *How did you get your lovely cat?*
Child: *He was in the middle of the road and my Dad put on the brakes* (amplification of screeching brakes, reactions in the car) *and ...*
Teacher: *Did your Dad stop the car?*
Child: *We were going up north.*
Teacher: *So what happened after your Dad stopped the car?*
Child: *My Mom picked him up. He chews on the chair and eats spaghetti my baby sister feeds him ...*
Teacher: (focusing) *Tell me what happened when your Dad stopped the car.*
Child: *He ...*
Teacher: *Who?*
Child: *My Dad stopped the car.*
Teacher: *And then what?*
Child: *My Mom picked him up.*
Teacher: *Let's tell people that it was a cat that was picked up. My Dad ...*
Child: *My Dad stopped the car.*
Teacher: *And...*
Child: *My Mom picked up the cat.*
Teacher: *Now everyone will know how you got your cat. Let's go for it!*

The teacher above prevented what professional writers reveal as the primary causes of procedural writer's block: having nothing of substance to say or being confronted with too many possibilities. In this short interaction before the story, the teacher opened the conversation with a question about the child's pet. The question was not so broad that he could not sort through his mental schema about his pet cat. When the chair-chewing, spaghetti-eating cat facts were presented there was potential for confusion, but the teacher refocused the conversation on how the cat was found. Maybe the next day, her prompt will be, "What happens when your cat chews on the chairs?" Or, even more titillating, "How does your cat's face look after eating a plate of spaghetti?" The talk is interactive but kept focused by the teacher who is genuinely interested in the child's ideas (Clay, 1993).

Lucy Calkins (1986) points out that teachers often appear to listen to a learner, but instead of giving a natural reaction, such as laughing, sighing, smiling, or reflecting, they tend to look for questions in an effort to "improve" the writing. The talk before story-writing needs to be genuine, not interrogatory in tone. Clay

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(1991) observes that if the child can carry on a conversation with the teacher, "then each is using a flexibility of language that is suitable for good communication to take place" (p. 73). During such conversations, children's ideas can surface and be polished to enhance writing stories.

Roaming Around the Known is the time to establish a conversational tempo geared to the linguistic style of the individual child as well as a time to explore interests that can become topics for authentic expression in writing. As stated so well in *Dancing with a Pen* (1996), "Learners write best on topics they own. This does not mean that they have always selected their topics without help or stimulus; it does mean that they have something to say in their own voice about their subject and, therefore, the best purpose of all of writing" (p. 27).

As the teacher and child face the unusual task (to novice learners) of writing messages in text, the teacher needs to focus on the importance of communicating the young learner's ideas. The blank page is a challenge for the teacher and the child: the teacher reminds the child of the intended message as the child struggles with the perplexities of learning how to transcribe his ideas. For the novice writer, the teacher guards the balance between composing the message and the challenges of transcribing it.

Transcribing Written Language

Writing and reading text are two processes that entail similar challenges in using print conventions. One of these challenges is directionality. The novice writer must sort out spatially on the blank page where to start, which way to go, where the second line starts—all while moving from the top to the bottom of the page. Another challenge is learning that oral language needs to be segmented into words that are represented in print with white spaces between them. Additionally, letter formation, letter size, and use of capital and lower case letters all present hard physical work for young writers. And then the child must learn how to spell which can be equally puzzling. The supportive, co-constructing-of-text teacher helps the child maintain the importance and wording of his message during the tough physical labor.

The young writer learns how to use a variety of strategies to record his message in print. In Clay's (1993) words:

- Sometimes you can analyze words you want to write.
- Sometimes you have to know how to spell a particular word.
- Sometimes you have to 'make it like another word you know' which means get it by analogy with a common spelling pattern in English (p. 35).

In the very first lessons the Reading Recovery teacher uses procedures to foster each of these strategies the child can use in Reading Recovery lessons and in classroom writing.

For closer examination of their purpose, I shall explore each strategy used to write text.

Sometimes you can analyze new words you want to write. In Section 6: Hearing and Recording Sound in Words, Clay (1993) explicates the activities designed to help the child think about the order of the sounds in spoken words and to analyze words he needs to write into the correct sequence of sounds. The child is encouraged to say the word slowly, listening and recording. "Say it slowly" is a prompt which will empower the child to approximate the correct spelling of words in classroom writing activities. Therefore, it is imperative for the child to know why he must say the word slowly and listen: to record the sounds he hears in *oral language* as letters in *written language*.

In the introduction to this section, Clay encourages us as teachers to choose from the child's orally composed story two or three words they can profitably work on together. Why two or three? The frequency and consistency of using this strategy (analyzing a word you want to write) on the practice page will help the child internalize its power.

Teachers need to take seriously the word "profitably." Early in lessons, the teacher needs to select words that will allow the child to feel the power of this strategy. If the 2 or 3 words chosen to place in Elkonin boxes are predictable in sound-to-letter (e. g., bone, bake), then the child will understand the value of applying this behavior to other situations. It works! If the teacher chooses words that are difficult to hear requiring a great deal of the teacher's knowledge of spelling (e. g., saw, night), then the child will not feel in control. As the child acquires orthographic awareness from constant exposure to print, he begins to sense the position of letters in less predictable words.

However, saying the word too slowly may work against the child who records every single sound heard much like the phonetician recording an unfamiliar dialect or language. In overextending words, children will hear too many sounds, e. g., the schwa sound after an overextended "b" sound; this confuses the child's work in Elkonin boxes. Frank Smith (1994) explains the adult's problem:

> **We (adults) know something about spelling, we persuade ourselves that we can hear the spelling in some spoken words. For example we may claim to hear the 't' in the usual pronunciation of the word 'writer.' Children do not share the adult inability to perceive the actual sound of the speech; this is the second problem. They will attempt to reproduce the sounds like a professional phonetician (p. 198).**

Clay (1993) reminds us as teachers to, "let him hear the sounds separated but in a natural way" (p. 32). But she informs us in *Becoming Literate* (1991) that, "sound-to-letter analysis does not reign supreme in the hierarchy of skills to be acquired for very long. The child who has learned only a small reading or writing vocabulary begins to generalize about letter-sound relationships quite early" (p. 88). This leads us to explore the next strategy in learning how to record stories fluently and efficiently.

Sometimes you have to know how to spell a particular word. The high frequency words in the English language are needed often in writing text. The child needs to know why he is writing that word over and over again on the practice page, on the whiteboard, in the sand, and so forth. In Roaming Around the Known, the concept of what a high frequency word is

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in his language should be developed. Hunting across books, newspapers, or magazines for a particular word (e. g., 'is') gives the child a sense of its frequency. As a novice to text reading, how could he know that the word 'is' is used lots of times! During the hunt, perhaps a comment might accompany the activity: *This is a little word that you will see in books and write in stories the rest of your life.*

As the child writes a new high frequency word on the practice page during the writing portion of the lesson, he may need to be reminded why it needs to be learned and why it needs to be fluent. Praise the child when a high frequency word is quickly written in a story. "The child develops a sense of mastery when he writes a word which is quickly recognized by an adult" (Clay, 1975, p. 70). Recently a little girl's face lit up when she was told by the teacher: *Now I can read that word, anyone can read what you just wrote.* It's like the fuss made over the first word uttered by the infant that is understood by the adult!

The section on the procedure to help the young writer develop a "little movement programme" to produce these high frequency words (Clay, 1993, p. 30) is entitled: "To get fluent writing." The operative word for the teacher is 'get;' not, 'try to,' but 'get.' The use of this choice of word strongly suggests that the teacher must be insistent, persistent, and consistent in obtaining mastery of these little words. With a cadre of known words under control (not semi-control) the child will be able to get to more words and use the words in the classroom. As with all word work, however, fluency work on the practice page is a temporary detour and the teacher needs to bring the meaning of the child's story back into focus.

Clay (1991) informs the teacher that, "As the core of known words builds in writing, and the high frequency words become known, these provide a series from which other words can be composed taking familiar bits from known words by analogy" (p. 244). The child's ability to make analogies, "relating something he knows to something new, and classing the two things as similar" (Clay, 1993, p. 50) hinges on the known being under control and secured. This knowledge leads the child to another way of knowing how to record ideas efficiently.

Sometimes you have to 'make it like another word you know' which means get it by analogy with a common spelling pattern used in English. Initially, the teacher needs to model how this is done. For example, when Andrew needed the word 'new' for writing his story in Lesson 6, the teacher asked Andrew to clap And-rew, wrote it on the practice page, and brought the child to the second syllable sound similarity to 'new.' In order to assist the child with analogous thinking the teacher must know what the child knows and capture every opportunity to foster this linking from known to new words. As the core of known words and spelling generalizations increase, the use of analogies to get to new words should increase proportionally.

The teacher's role changes as the child becomes more adept at writing stories. Having fostered the powerful strategies discussed above for children's recording of their ideas, the

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teacher must encourage children to write longer and more complex sentences to express ideas with clarity. Also, children will have less need to work on the practice page. A shift from demonstration to occasional verbal guidance of the child through text writing must occur to foster independence and practice orchestration of the strategies he has acquired; furthermore, the composing and transcribing of the story should flow from the pen with less physical effort from the child.

The joy of this fusion of composition and transcription is exemplified by the stories Andrew wrote late in his program. In Lesson 47, Andrew's story was: *We went to a concert. It was loud and some people were dancing*. The underlined words or word parts were done independently. The choice of topic had been selected without prompting by the teacher who was genuinely intrigued by the story. The sentences at this point in the program were still told to the teacher aloud so that composing was not quite integrated with the transcribing. The role of the teacher was to model the power of analogy to get to known word bits: "The 'er' in 'concert' is like 'her.'" "'Ou' in 'loud' is like 'out.'" "'Some' sounds like 'come.'"

By lesson 69, a teacher leader was called to assess Andrew for discontinuing when he wrote: *It is Christmas in (6) six days and Santa is comeing to town to bring Andrew some presents.* The teacher's prompt for the story had been: *What wonderful news do you have to share today?* Andrew did not rehearse before be began writing. He picked up the pen and composed and transcribed simultaneously. The role of the teacher was anticipatory in terms of trying to predict the traps in the English language for Andrew at this stage of his development. In synchrony while he was writing his message, the teacher whispered, *There's a 't' next you can't hear* (for Christmas); *Write the word for six, it's what grownups do; Say the word present so you can hear the last sound.* The teacher did not work immediately for standard spelling of comeing during the writing because the child was processing on the run; instead, she opted for a short mini-lesson when Andrew completed writing his story.

Andrew has a self-extending system in writing. He chose the topic to share, selected his wording as he wrote in his voice, using the third person to convey the message. The strategies for recording were so integrated that only by watching his lips did the teacher sense when he was using analysis; analogous thinking could no longer be overtly observed. Most importantly, he expressed joy at being able to share his news in writing. Andrew and his teacher had met the challenge of maintaining a balance between composing the message (his ideas and language) and transcribing the message for his intended audience: his parents . . . or (perhaps) Santa Claus?

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